

ppi 201502ZU4645

Esta publicación científica en formato digital es continuidad de la revista impresa
ISSN-Versión Impresa 0798-1406 / ISSN-Versión on line 2542-3185 Depósito legal pp
197402ZU34

CUESTIONES POLÍTICAS

Instituto de Estudios Políticos y Derecho Público "Dr. Humberto J. La Roche"
de la Facultad de Ciencias Jurídicas y Políticas de la Universidad del Zulia
Maracaibo, Venezuela



Vol.40

N° 72

Enero

Junio

2022

The role of populist parties in spreading Euroscepticism

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.46398/cuestpol.4072.10>

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Abstract

The aim of the paper was to analyse the current level of Euroscepticism in the European Union, to identify the current challenges populist parties face in the Euroscepticism realities and promotion. The main method of research was the observation method, which, together with the comparative method, revealed the selected issues of the paper. The conducted research has shown that the rise of populist parties primarily reflects a response to a wide range of rapid cultural changes undermining the core values and practices of Western societies. At the same time, the pandemic and changes in public consciousness have led to a decline in the activity of political parties and the introduction of Eurosceptic ideas per se. As part of the research, we have argued that the deepening of European integration is not perceived positively by member states as well, given the unnatural order of legal relations in the union. The findings will also require comparison with the results of the forthcoming EU elections, which has been identified as a roadmap for further author's research.

Keywords: ideas of European integration; Euroscepticism scenarios; cosmopolitan liberalism; populist party system; United States of Europe.

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El papel de los partidos populistas en la difusión del Euroescepticismo

Resumen

El objetivo del trabajo fue analizar el nivel actual de euroescepticismo en la Unión Europea, para identificar los desafíos actuales que enfrentan los partidos populistas en las realidades y promoción del euroescepticismo. El principal método de investigación fue la observación, que, junto con el método comparativo, reveló los temas seleccionados del artículo. La investigación realizada ha demostrado que el surgimiento de los partidos populistas refleja principalmente una respuesta a una amplia gama de rápidos cambios culturales que socavan los valores y prácticas fundamentales de las sociedades occidentales. Al mismo tiempo, la pandemia y los cambios en la conciencia pública han provocado un declive en la actividad de los partidos políticos y la introducción de ideas euroescépticas *per se*. A modo de conclusión, los autores han argumentado que la profundización de la integración europea tampoco es percibida positivamente por los estados miembros, dado el orden antinatural de las relaciones legales en la unión. Los hallazgos también requerirán una comparación con los resultados de las próximas elecciones de la Unión Europea, que se han identificado como una hoja de ruta para futuras investigaciones sobre el tema.

Palabras clave: ideas de integración europea; escenarios de euroescepticismo; liberalismo cosmopolita; sistema de partidos populistas; Estados Unidos de Europa.

Introduction

After World War II, relations between peoples of different nations became more cosmopolitan, and numerous bonds linked their lives. The belief that one lives in a homogeneous nation-state was weakened by flows of workers, expatriates, tourists, students, refugees, and diaspora communities. Cosmopolitanism emphasises the value of open national borders, shared multicultural values, and the diversity of peoples and lifestyles in inclusive societies (Lauwers *et al.*, 2021). Moreover, cosmopolitan ideas highlighting open borders and societies are combined with liberal values that challenge the authoritarian component of populism.

This emphasises the importance of horizontal restraints and balances in the representative democracy institutions, protection of minority rights, participation in elections and party membership, and tolerance of social, intellectual, and political diversity. This includes the process of pluralistic negotiation and compromise, the contribution of scientific knowledge to

rational policymaking, and the post-war architecture of global governance and international cooperation. Social liberalism is also related to the maintenance of equal rights for women and minorities, flexible rather than fixed gender roles, changing gender identities and LGBT rights, environmental protection, and secular rather than religious values.

The long-term processes of generational change at the end of the 20th century have been a catalyst for culture wars, as these changes are particularly worrying for less educated and older groups in the countries. Populists support charismatic leaders, reflecting a deep distrust of the establishment and mainstream parties, which are now led by educated elites with progressive cultural views on moral issues. The current cultural split separating populists and cosmopolitan liberals is seen as an orthogonal classic economic class split that dominated party competition in Western Europe in the post-war decades.

The spread of progressive values has stimulated a negative cultural reaction among people threatened by such developments. Less educated and older citizens, especially white males, who were once the privileged majority culture in Western societies, are outraged when told that traditional values are “politically incorrect” once they have felt marginalized in their own countries. Growing support for populist parties has disrupted the politics of many Western societies.

All these factors together have gradually produced their impact on the European Union, which has faced a number of compounding problems since its creation. In particular, the economic crisis and the plethora of refugees, the results of the British referendum, and the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 have shaped the future of Europe over the past decade. These challenges have contributed to the emergence of populist parties, both left and right, seeking to undermine the current status quo (Gerbaudo, 2018), posing a threat to democracy.

This is a particularly favourable context for right-wing populist parties, which base their communication strategy on questioning the political conditions and foundations of legitimacy of the European Union, leading to an ideal scenario of Euroscepticism (Alonso-Muñoz and Casero-Ripollés, 2020). In this context, popular sovereignty functions as a link between left-wing and right-wing populist political actors. In both cases, they seek to regain control of their territory and regain lost autonomy in a highly globalised world in which membership of supranational organisations such as the European Union denies them the ability to legislate in their own countries. In Italy, the Five Star Movement was the most popular political choice in the 2018 elections (Chiaramonte *et al.*, 2018). In the 2017 French presidential election, the Front National won 7.5 million votes and made it to the second round, which has never happened before (Ivaldi, 2018).

In the UK, UKIP campaigned for Brexit, which resulted in an exit from the European Union (Usherwood, 2019). The Alt-Europe idea, seen as a conservative, xenophobic intergovernmental vision of a European “community of sovereign states,” “strong nations,” or “fatherland,” that hates the “centralised” United States of Europe, is now gaining momentum (Bergmann *et al.*, 2019: 541).

Furthermore, Europe has experienced a crisis of values that has led many citizens to question the integrity and permanence of the European Union. This aspect is included in the manifestos of a large number of populist parties (Vasilopoulou, 2018). Such parties are not opposed to the basic principles of the European Union, but to those who lead that institution. In other words, Euroscepticism manifests itself in criticism of certain policies pursued by the European Union, rather than in condemnation of the institution itself.

In this context, a clear line can be drawn between the economic and social aspects of Euroscepticism. In particular, economic Euroscepticism is common among left-wing and right-wing populists, while cultural Euroscepticism may focus on national sovereignty or the difference between “us and them” regarding immigrants. It is worth noting that there is a difference between “soft” and “hard” forms of Euroscepticism. In this context, opposition to the European Union policy is considered a “soft” form, whereas opposition to the European integration process is directly seen as a “hard” form of Euroscepticism.

It should be noted that populism is a diverse phenomenon, which makes the chosen research topic relevant for analysis in the European context. Populist movements form an ideology that can be adapted to multiple contexts, which sees society as divided into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, the pure people, and the corrupt elite (Gerstlé, 2019), and argues that politics should be an expression of the collective will.

Driven by economic anxiety, political cynicism, and cultural negative reactions to cosmopolitan elites (Norris and Inglehart, 2019), anti-establishment movements have often attracted the lion’s share of media attention around the world. The rise of anti-establishment movements goes hand in hand with the development of a more controversial form of political competition, namely, electoral campaigns become increasingly violent. They rely on political attacks against opponents, become more and more uncivilised and promote emotional appeals designed to be the cause of developing fear and anxiety in society. It is worth noting that the chosen research topic is continually updated by the realities of political and pandemic challenges, and therefore requires a new level of scientific inquiry.

Given the above, the aim of the paper was to identify and expose the current problems of populist parties in the context of supranational crises and pandemics, and to assess the level of their direct impact on Euroscepticism in the European Union. In order to fulfil this objective, we defined the following tasks: 1) identify contemporary features of populist parties within the EU Member States; 2) reveal the state of Eurosceptic sentiment in the EU in the context of today's global challenges; 3) summarise the guidelines for improving the response to Euroscepticism in the context of European integration.

1. Methods and materials

As part of the scientific research, a significant scientific and methodological toolkit was appropriated, allowing the formation of research vectors, and reaching well-founded author's conclusions in the field under study. The stages of the research are shown schematically in Figure 1.

The solution of the tasks outlined in the paper was made possible by using the leading practical method, i.e., observation. This methodological toolkit made it possible to draw the author's conclusions on the prospects for the spread of Eurosceptic ideas within the European Union in the context of the pandemic and the transformation of the political space after Brexit. At the same time, when combined with clustering and generalisation methods, the observation method allowed the projection of leading vectors of influence of populist parties on the EU political space within the framework of increasing globalisation challenges. This method provided support and grounding for the dubitability of further perspectives on Euroscepticism ideas as such.

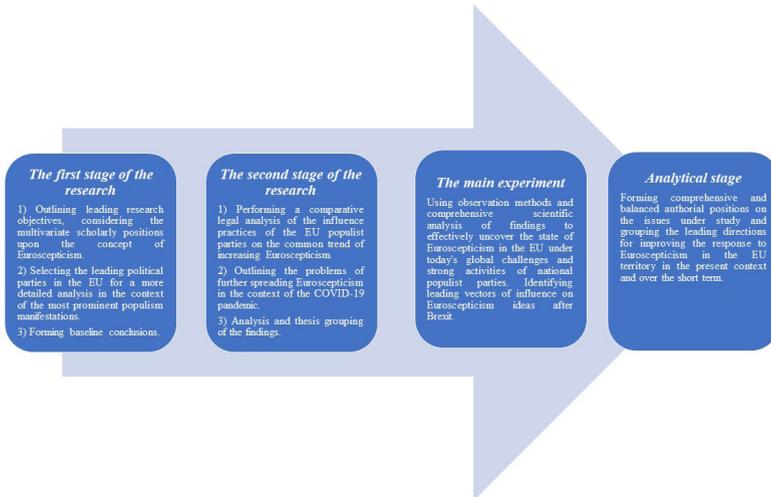


Figure 1. Generalised vector structure of the paper subject matter research (own creation)

The comparative method was also useful in grouping the framework programmes of the leading EU populist parties, comparing them, and formulating their proactive positions on the Euroscepticism vector. This method also allowed to draw attention to the negative and unscrupulous practices of the parties under study in introducing their propaganda ideas. At the same time, analytical and statistical methods made it possible to observe trends in the rise and fall of support for certain EU populist parties in previous national elections. The leading advantage of the study was the validation of indicators of the transformation of electoral support for populist parties, which allowed a fragmented projection of the author's vision of the prospects for the upcoming EU elections.

The historical-legal method was used to form the author's view of the genesis of the development of Euroscepticism trends and the creation and functioning of populist parties at the level of EU Member States. The method of content analysis allowed us to distinguish the programme materials of EU populist parties according to separate quantitative and qualitative parameters with the subsequent interpretation of the obtained results; the dogmatic method was used to interpret the essence and content of Euroscepticism ideas, to improve the conceptual and categorical research apparatus; the logical and normative method was applied to analyse the regulatory legal acts on political party activities in the territory of individual EU states.

Using the formal and dogmatic (logical) method as well as the systematic method, the objective and subjective attributes of populist parties in the EU territory are examined and their political shortcomings and vectors of influence on the EU political space are identified. The problematic and chronological method structured the research text, while empirical analysis helped to compare the historical development of both Eurosceptic ideas and the emergence of populist party movements.

The research has involved a considerable amount of empirical material, which has influenced the formation of the author's conclusions and positions disclosed in the paper. In this paper, we have comprehensively considered and cited thirty-six leading sources.

2. Results

The history of long-term cultural change in Western societies and the emergence of new green parties and progressive social movements based on these values is well known. Between 1970 and 1990, the rise of post-materialist concerns was a major component of social existence. In recent decades, however, the negative reaction to cultural change has become increasingly prominent in Western democracies. There are massive cultural changes taking place throughout advanced industrial societies, which seem shocking to those who hold to traditional values. Moreover, immigration flows, especially from low-income countries, have changed the ethnic composition of advanced industrial societies. New citizens speak different languages and have different religions and lifestyles than the indigenous population, reinforcing the impression that traditional norms and values are fast disappearing (The Economist, 2019).

Today, Euroscepticism continues to be conventionally interpreted as direct and unequivocal opposition to the process of European integration. Euroscepticism can be divided into "hard" and "soft". Hard Euroscepticism consists of principled opposition to the EU and may even demand the withdrawal of these states from the EU or deny them the prospect of EU membership. Soft Euroscepticism does not entail principled opposition to the EU but focuses on policy areas where there is a divergence between national interests and the EU trajectory. All manifestations of Euroscepticism can be articulated at both party and public (or grassroots) levels within and outside the EU.

The Euroscepticism of political parties depends on ideology, political, social and economic circumstances and the difference between domestic and foreign policy. Consequently, the participation of Eurosceptics may depend on pliability and/or situational adaptation. Eurosceptic parties tend to take a softer stance and do not oppose the idea of European integration as such.

However, in one way or another, they are opposed to its materialisation. These euro-rejecting parties take a tougher stance and oppose both the idea and materialisation. Radical left-wing parties have emerged because of their institutionalisation, leading to a diversity within the party family from traditional communists to social populists.

The analytical classification of party Euroscepticism includes the categories of revisionists, reformists, gradualists, maximalists, minimalists and refuseniks. The revisionist category opts for a return to the status quo before the adoption of a major EU treaty/decision, whereas reformists wish to modify one or more existing EU institutions and/or practices. Eurosceptic gradualists formally support the European integration process, although at a slower pace and with more caution. Maximalists are in favour of moving the existing process as quickly as possible towards higher levels of integration, while minimalists tend to accept the status quo but oppose further integration. Finally, the anti-decision parties strongly oppose participation in the EU or any of its constituent institutions. Within this mode of interpretation, the dominant brands of Euroscepticism among Brexit supporters in the ranks of the British Conservatives and smaller political actors (e.g., UKIP) can be located on a trajectory between a refusenik and maximalist position that opts for leaving the EU with the greatest possible benefits.

Euroscepticism is a very relevant concept in the study of left-wing and even right-wing populism. Left-wing Eurosceptics tend to see European integration as a project embodied on the neoliberal basis of globalised capitalism. Meanwhile, the two most important areas for right-wing Eurosceptics in Europe are: (a) varying degrees of opposition to immigration and insistence on the principle of strict borders; (b) defending national sovereignty against “Brussels domination.” In Central and Eastern Europe, as early as the 1990s, a number of parties (usually right-wing) started articulating their nascent Euroscepticism, according to the conceptualisation that the EU “imposes” minority rights from the outside and weakens national sovereignty. Since the outbreak of the 2015 migration crisis, brands of Euroscepticism among some conservative right-wing parties have undergone a qualitative transformation; they are no longer focused on negotiating a compromise on EU membership terms, but rather nurture ambitions to revise the EU configuration (at least in specific policy areas) and reform its existing institutions and practices from within.

Eurosceptic parties have largely been accused of running tough campaigns. Negative messages, intimidation, and even impoliteness, are in line with the style of Eurosceptic movements, often incorporating strong populist discourse. Populist rhetoric tends to reflect a more transgressive political style, emphasising agitation, spectacular action, exaggeration, judicious provocation, and perceived violation of political, social, and

cultural taboos. Populists often demonstrate an open willingness to challenge standard social norms by displaying bad manners and introducing a more negative hard-line tone into the debate. Populists are more confrontational and aggressive and use more negative and more emotional campaigns. In this sense, harsher campaigns are typical of Eurosceptics. Most Eurosceptic parties are on the right (often radical) side of the political spectrum.

In today's context, populism reflects a deep cynicism and dissatisfaction with existing power, be it big business, banks, multinationals, media experts, elected politicians and officials, intellectual elites, and academic experts, as well as the arrogant and privileged rich people. At the same time, populists are characterised by an authoritarian preference for the personal power of a strong and charismatic leadership, which is perceived to reflect the will of the people. Populists also favour direct forms of majoritarian democracy to express the voice of the people through opinion polls, referenda, and plebiscites rather than the institutional checks and balances systems and protection of minority rights that are built into representative democracy processes.

After all, the populist discourse usually emphasises nativism or xenophobic nationalism under “ordinary people,” suggesting that “the people” is one and that states should exclude people from other countries and cultures. Populism prefers monoculturalism to multiculturalism, national self-interest to international cooperation and development aid, closed borders to the free flow of people, ideas, labour and capital, and traditionalism to progressive and liberal social values (Figure 2).

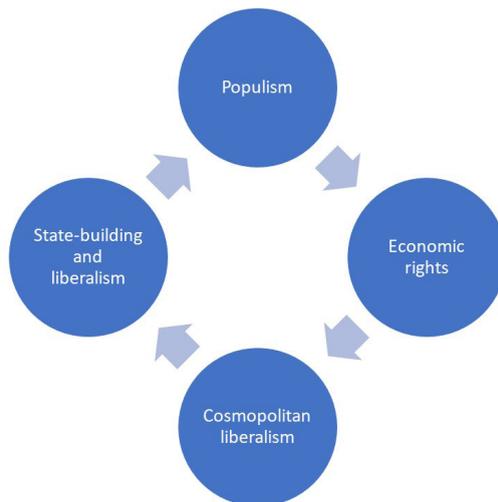


Figure 2. Conditional model of EU political party sectoral competition (based on author's comparative research)

Three indicators are mainly used today to classify populist parties: the anti-elite ratings from the Chapel Hill Expert Survey 2017 (Polk *et al.*, 2017), the Inglehart and Norris (2016) populist party scale and The PopuList (The PopuList, 2021). For example, the scale developed by Inglehart and Norris (2016) combines the party's expert assessments of the following attitudes and positions: 1) support for traditional social values; 2) opposition to liberal lifestyles; 3) promotion of nationalism; 4) support for a strict rule of law; 5) assimilation for immigrants; 6) support for restrictive immigration policies; 7) opposition to ethnic minority empowerment; 8) support for religious principles in politics and 9) support for rural interests. The scale ranges from 0 to 100, with parties with a rating above 80 classified as populist. The Populist is a classification developed by a group of more than 70 scholars from across Europe and around the world who define political groups as extreme right-wing, extreme left-wing and/or Eurosceptic. Given the above, it is possible to roughly divide traditional and populist EU parties into three groups as follows: left-wing, right-wing, and centrist (Figure 3).

Today, unlike most populists of the past, the parties claim to be committed to democracy, but such a democracy in which the sovereignty of the people is unlimited and materialised in the image of an all-powerful leader. These characteristics are common to all populists. By 2020, however, the most impressive thing was their visible progress in many countries. This was particularly evident in the 2019 European Parliament elections, when right-wing populists were the most numerous and strongest.

However, by general recognition, unlike in Hungary, Poland, or the Czech Republic, most of these right-wing populists did not make it into power structures, with the exception of Lega Nord in Italy (later known as Lega). This party has been part of government coalitions four times, most recently between 2018 and 2019. But although they are in opposition, right-wing populist parties do influence the way political vectors of reform are embodied. In fact, several opponents of populism, such as Matteo Renzi in Italy between 2014 and 2016, Emmanuel Macron in France during his 2017 presidential campaign and Boris Johnson in the UK deliberately used populist style to win or even govern.

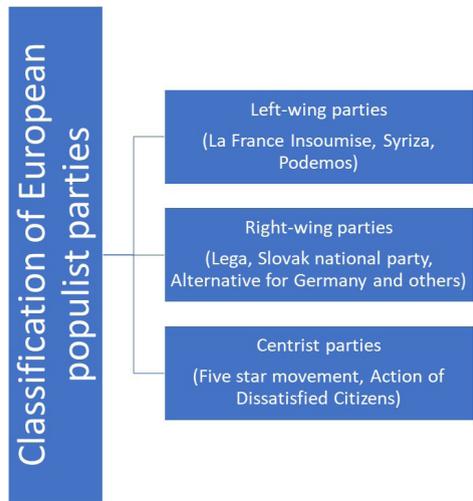


Figure 3. Classification and examples of EU populist parties (as summarised by the author)

Voter support for populist parties increased in November 2021 in three of the 27 European Union member states and fell 10 times in the last month, according to a poll conducted by Europe Elects (2021), a German start-up that aggregates opinion poll results from across the EU. According to Bloomberg calculations, the popularity of far-right parties rose in the Netherlands, Portugal and Cyprus and fell in Estonia, France, Slovenia, Latvia, Denmark, Italy, and Poland (Bershidsky, 2021). The biggest increase of 2.0 percentage points was recorded in the Netherlands and the biggest drop of 0.8 points was recorded in Estonia. The far-left political forces expanded in the Netherlands, Spain and Denmark and declined in France, Greece, Portugal, Ireland, and Cyprus.

Support for the extreme left increased most by 0.5 percentage points in the Netherlands and fell most by 1.9 points in France. Eurosceptic parties improved their poll results in the Netherlands, Spain and Finland and declined in France, Greece, Estonia, Slovenia, Ireland, Portugal, Italy, Poland, and Sweden. The biggest increase of 3.0 percentage points was in the Netherlands and the biggest drop of 2.6 points was in France (Bershidsky, 2021). It can be stated that although experts mostly agree that populist political leaders or parties exhibit a high level of anti-elitism, definitions of populism differ. Within the EU, there are significant differences both between countries and between the ideological varieties of populism. While the success of left-wing and valence populists is concentrated in certain

areas, right-wing populist parties have consolidated as key players in most EU countries.

The Covid-19 pandemic has revealed many populist inconsistencies, incoherencies, and demagogy, whether the respective parties are in opposition or in power, marking a turning point for the populists, the beginning of their decline. The population still tends to approve measures and restrictions, mainly in Italy and France. The occasional populist attacks on foreigners and migrants are also less evident now when the overall priority is health. In Italy, mentions of the Lega party are declining in the polls (although it still accounts for almost a quarter of the electorate and remains the leading Italian party), as is the popularity of Salvini, who has been asked by leading members of his own party to change his approach. In France, Marine Le Pen is well placed in the polls ahead of the first round of the 2022 presidential election, receiving between 24% and 27%, according to an IFOP poll conducted in late September.

Right-wing populist parties in Europe took a huge step towards unification after 16 right-wing populist parties from 14 countries issued a joint statement calling for a European Union based on sovereign member states instead of a federal bloc. The main forces behind the declaration are the Polish ruling party, Law and Justice, Viktor Orbán's Fidesz, Marine Le Pen's National Rally, with Matteo Salvini's Lega and Georgia Meloni's Brothers of Italy also present (Zsiros, 2021). The possible emergence of new populist right-wing forces is not an immediate threat to the current Brussels establishment, as their number of MEPs will remain unchanged. In the long run, however, it could ultimately affect decision-making in the EU. If their parties manage to remain a cohesive force until the 2024 European elections, they will have a chance to position themselves as the main opposition force in the next European Parliament.

Thus, the 2019 European Parliament elections were held against a backdrop of growing polarisation around the world, a phenomenon that has also appeared in these elections, triggered by the recent multi-faceted crises in the EU. However, a clear sign of polarisation in the EU may be the divisions associated with European integration, an issue that tends to be much more relevant to Eurosceptics than to Europhiles. European integration has moved from a bureaucratic political field to a highly polarised and topical issue in European party systems. This increasing prominence began in the 1990s and continues to grow. It is mainly due to political entrepreneurs pointing out the problem of European integration. The main parties tend to occupy a pro-integration space and avoid emphasising the issue.

Populist parties have selectively politicised individual crises, while adopting different positions on European integration. There is a difference between left-wing and right-wing versions of populist Euroscepticism politics. At the same time, all left-wing populists have stood their ground in

criticising Europe mainly in social and economic terms. The Great Recession provided an opportunity for right-wing populists to develop similar discourses only to return to culturally inspired notions of Euroscepticism at the peak of the migration crisis. In Austria, for example, there is already a long-standing populist radical right-wing party in the Freedom Party (FPÖ).

It has established itself as a party focused on defending Austrian identity with an anti-immigration and soft Eurosceptic stance (Hadj Abdou and Ruedin, 2021). The Flemish interest (VB) is a populist right-wing radical party which seeks to represent Flemish nationalism and demands secession from Belgium (Sijstermans, 2021). The Flemish interest is against multiculturalism and is a soft Eurosceptic. The party won 12% of the vote in the 2019 national elections (with 18.5% in Flanders) and 12.1% in the 2019 European Parliament elections. In turn, the Civic Alliance is considered to be the only populist party in Cyprus. It positions itself as “post-ideological” and focuses its vision on Cyprus and its citizens.

The party is primarily concerned about a peaceful settlement of the Cyprus issue aiming to remove the Turkish army from the island as the only prospect for the security and prosperity of all ethnic groups in the common homeland. In France, there is one of the oldest and most established populist parties in the form of the Rassemblement National (RN, formerly Front National). Marine Le Pen’s leadership has changed the position of the party under its former leader Jean-Marie Le Pen in an attempt to soften the limits of its hardline stance on immigration, but remains a party that fights and mobilises immigration, law and order and national identity.

The Rassemblement National takes a steady stance of soft Eurosceptics (Buswell, 2021). Hungarian politics in the last decade have been dominated by Prime Minister V. Orban and the populist Fidesz force (together with its satellite the Christian Democratic People’s Party). Fidesz’s convincing victories in the last three general elections have resulted in a parliamentary supermajority, giving V. Orban ample opportunity to put Hungary on an illiberal democratic path. Italy presents numerous examples of populism. The oldest party still represented in the Italian parliament is Lega, a radical right-wing party that won 34.3% of the vote in the 2019 European Parliament elections, joining forces with the M5S to form a government after the 2018 general elections (Vercesi, 2021).

In September 2017, the far-right Alternative for Germany won 12.6 % of the votes, entering the Bundestag for the first time with an anti-euro and anti-immigration platform. In Germany, the economic disparity between East and West has been used as a plausible explanation for Euroscepticism, right-wing extremism, and anti-migrant sentiment, which is stronger in the poorer countries of the former East. The status quo orientation of German politics became more entrenched and highly unsustainable in European

politics than in any other sphere. The country was devoid of the political and economic problems faced by other parts of Europe: the economy was booming, while unemployment was at record lows and the budget was balanced.

There was no fundamental erosion of the political party system, as happened in France or Italy. The Germans therefore had little motivation for radical change. They were among the biggest beneficiaries of the bloc's single market and the eurozone. At the same time, Euroscepticism has grown steadily in many other member states. After Brexit, there were widespread fears that the EU would break up. Berlin's response to this was to prevent the break-up of the EU, but it had no clear idea how to move forward. It can be stated that Brexit is a clear manifestation of Euroscepticism and a consequence of the subversion of populist parties. This event has fundamentally transformed the ideas of the respective political movements (Figure 4).



Figure 4. Vectors of influence of EU populist parties on ideas of Euroscepticism after Brexit (as summarised by the author)

After the Brexit referendum in 2016, the European right-wing populist parties (PRR) have moved towards an alternative European political agenda. The Alt-Europe is a conservative, xenophobic intergovernmental vision of a European “community of sovereign states,” “strong nations,” or “fatherland,” that hates the “centralised” United States of Europe. European integration has deepened dramatically since the 1980s, has expanded, and has barely survived a series of existential crises since 2005. The Eurosceptic PRR parties have benefited from the following politicisation and objection to the EU. The *Brexit* referendum campaign pushed them towards the *EUxit* campaign.

However, amid the popular reaction to *Brexit* chaos and the *PRR*'s increased confidence in winning over national and European authorities, they changed their focus to an alternative European reform of the EU. They use the theses of an ancient ethnic European civilisation of diverse, peacefully cooperating, free sovereign nations to exclude the EU cultural unification and present an alternative Europe. This civilisation may be Christian or secular, conservative or humanist, with free trade or protectionist steady state, and avaricious or demonstrative of solidarity. But the *PRR* will protect it from the artificial, homogenising totalitarian experiment of the EU imposing liberalism and Islamist colonists. At the same time, it cannot be asserted with certainty that European right-wing populist parties have gained much support and strengthened their position in the political space during the pandemic.

3. Discussion

The study has shown that the mainstream parties on both the right and the left political spectrum have become unable to offer significant solutions as state sovereignty has been undermined by a neoliberal form of globalisation and the EU integration process. States can no longer control the flow of capital, goods, services, and people; they can no longer control their borders. Furthermore, authoritative parties do not want to change the current situation. The above is worrying because political parties have adopted neoliberalism not only as a set of economic policies, but also as a rational approach from which to conclude that globalisation is irreversible and there is no alternative (Sandrin, 2020).

The detrimental economic and political effects of neo-liberal globalisation and migration patterns have generated affects (anxiety, fear, hatred, resentment) that are successfully mobilised by right-wing political parties. This author's thesis is supported by Sandrin (2020), who points out that effective and ethical coping strategies should include political discourses that appeal to the general population and that are inclusive and pluralistic. This progressive political discourse should try to formulate a response to these very real fears and anxieties, and which should be adapted to different historical, geographical, and cultural contexts, namely, inclusive, pluralistic and agonistic.

We can conclude that populist radical right parties have become a permanent feature of many party systems in European countries, and their electoral success has increased since 2015, when many migrants and refugees arrived in the EU (Cordis, 2021). Studies on *PRR* show that these parties seek to influence policy making in different ways. In this respect, the view of Lutz (2019) is correct which is that the growth of *PRR* can indirectly

influence the political positions of major parties by introducing new subjects or otherwise articulating existing winds of political development, thereby pushing governments and other parties to change their own positions.

A number of scholars emphasise that *PRRs* influence the positions of other parties directly when they are in government or indirectly by treating topics such as migration differently than other parties (Bergmann *et al.*, 2021). Nevertheless, as Lazar (2020) notes that in France, for example, populist parties are still unable to attract the large sections of the population they need to reach the presidency. Also, Eurosceptic movements tend to be small opposition parties and parties that tend to be negative towards their opponents (Nai *et al.*, 2021). However, Lega has reinforced its nativist and populist profile, relying on being an anti-immigration and Eurosceptic party, but now in terms of a full-fledged national force (Taggart and Pirro, 2021). The positions of scholars corroborate the author's thesis on the prospects of *PRR* influence on the forthcoming EU elections.

As the EU has become a more visible and polarising issue in Western European party systems, many parties will need to discuss their position on the EU integration (Wagner, 2021). In fact, the M5S in Italy was the only actor who oscillated between different structures other than the simple right-wing populist parties (Pirro *et al.*, 2018). Therefore, further research into whether *PRR* narratives can be consistent enough to organise themselves in opposition and undermine the EU would be invaluable (Cooper *et al.*, 2019). This could be linked to new work on policy positions within soft Euroscepticism. Policy research mechanisms such as 'uploading' and 'downloading' could also be borrowed to explore how narratives of national politics and core identity narratives interact (McMahon, 2021).

The scholars support the author's position that severe domestic measures within countries, such as blockades, will inevitably go hand in hand with border closures and travel restrictions, leading to a temporary de-globalisation of the world or a partial reversal of certain tendencies of globalisation due to reduced cross-border movements. While populism in Western Europe will remain a force to be reckoned with in the foreseeable future.

The specific manifestations of the COVID-19 pandemic have led to nationalist populist actors on the political fringes struggling to remain relevant and to formulate messages that are both at odds with the establishment and resonate well with the public anxiety associated with COVID-19 (Dandolov, 2021). The pandemic has led to a significant loss of confidence in the EU among the population. In turn, Brexit has shown that deeper European integration is not the natural order of events and that EU citizens need to understand the benefits of membership (Leonard and Puglierin, 2021).

The scholarly search has substantiated that the politicisation of European integration has increased throughout Europe. In southern Europe, the trend cited should be interpreted as an expression of an alternative vision of Europe, contrary to the vision that prevails in some north-western European countries (Kriesi, 2020). On the contrary, in north-western Europe, where the politicisation of European integration has mainly been driven by the radical right, and in central-eastern Europe, where it has mainly been the result of the mobilisation of the conservative nationalist right, it is an expression of nationalist reaction.

To effectively overcome the further activation of populist parties, it is advisable to provide more opportunities for European citizens to produce direct influence in key decisions that are taken at the supranational level and affect their lives. Undoubtedly, in this context, the basic social protection system in the EU needs to be updated and effectively enforced, enabling people to escape poverty and live a decent life regardless of their country's economic influence.

Conclusions

Despite the PRR's overall narrative resources, intense nationalist chauvinism, rivalries, and political proclamations in manifestos will hinder the PRR's concrete collaboration to realise an alternative European dream.

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to ruling parties, even in countries such as Germany, finding themselves at odds with EU institutions and increasingly looking at issues because of "national" rather than "European" views, putting some of the major issues of nationalist-populist parties on their agenda. At the same time, fragmented ideas of Euroscepticism, produced by the active positions and actions of populist parties, have receded in the face of the pandemic, giving particular prominence to health promotion issues.

Some states have begun to oppose the further development of populist parties by launching active counter-policy. At the same time, an effective and ethical strategy to counter Euroscepticism should not see the political arena as a foundation for escalating conflict, since this very type of political discourse has alienated many voters and opened the way for right-wing populist parties claiming to actually listen to the people's troubles.

The scholarly debate on the chosen topic showed that the highlighted issues will need further, more detailed study over the long term. The COVID-19 pandemic continues to adjust the spread of Eurosceptic ideas in EU member states. Consequently, the activities of EU populist parties against the background of supranational changes will require further comparative analysis, which will be conducted by the author of the paper.

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UNIVERSIDAD
DEL ZULIA

CUESTIONES POLÍTICAS

Vol.40 N° 72

*Esta revista fue editada en formato digital y publicada en enero de 2022, por el **Fondo Editorial Serbiluz**, Universidad del Zulia. Maracaibo-Venezuela*

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